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HERRYMON MAURER

Simple Prayer

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To the Memory of Paul Griffith

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Since 1949 the purpose of Fellowship in Prayer is to promote the practice of prayer among all religious faiths whose fundamental belief is in God regardless of race, creed, or color, and whose tenets include the universal attributes of truth, honesty, justice, and mercy, that thereby there may arise a closer relation to Almighty God and a deeper spirit of fellowship among mankind.

Dear Reader,

This special issue of Fellowship in Prayer has been sent to you instead of our regular October-November issue.

Like all living things, Fellowship in Prayer is changing. We hope that you will keep us all in your prayers.

Our Fellowship has meaning only to the extent that we can help and encourage one another in deepening our inward lives and experience, and in serving the spirit of compassion and Truth in our daily lives. Let us remember that our lives are the testimony of our faiths, and that this earth is a sacred place.

Look for our next regular issue of Fellowship in Prayer in December.

E.M.

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BY HERRYMON MAURER

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Preface

The aim of this booklet, a new formulation of earlier material, is to suggest the usefulness of prayer and meditation to persons whose practice of it is largely unconscious. As the method of our dealing with Reality, with Truth, with God, prayer is the most significant activity in our lives, and the only one that uncovers meaningfulness in daily life and promotes deliverance from self-worship. For if we do not pray to God, we are only too likely to pray to ourselves and, forsaking our fellows, to fall into deceit, delusion, and despair.

The topic is prayer and meditation as they are addressed to Truth and not to ourselves. Of late, they have sometimes come to be self-satisfied soliloquies — perhaps, more typically, self-dissatisfied ones — in which there is ruminatingly considered the false self that appears to us to be the center of the universe. When love of self thus becomes confused with love of God, the reality of Truth attenuates, even as the unreality of self grows, and the consequence is not only self-centeredness but also misery and agitation, remorse and guilt.

In particular, the topic is hidden prayer. Consequently, this examination of it is not intended for the eyes of experts, for in matters of such privacy there can be no expertness: no display of intellects, no edifices of logic, no constructions of theology, nor any of the exclusiveness that leads to complex explanations of the universe and to quarrels with other explainers. There can be only ourselves, our neighbors, and the one God who is the God of all faiths and not ours alone.

In this booklet, finally, there is no capitalization of pronouns referring to God, a simple step undertaken to suggest to readers that true prayer and meditation are really unconventional, that praying means opening our lives to God, not taking off our hats to him, and that it must forever be rescued from self-satisfaction and self-righteousness, which, as the Bible informs us, are part of a conspicuous exhibition that is not prayer.

The booklet is addressed to persons of all faiths. Although it is the inward quickening given by his own faith that enables the writer to attempt that address, he intends no apology for his faith or any other. Faith, all faith, is beyond apology.

1. Quiet and catastrophe

Nothing is as secret as private prayer, nothing more social.

Two words only

At the age of five, I lived for a time with my grandmother and came to learn of her regular, but by no means rigid, practice of retiring to her room some time during the afternoon and sitting with her eyes closed in a rocking chair which she did not rock. She so sat for seldom less than half an hour, seldom more than an hour and a quarter. The door was left open and it was understood that she could be disturbed. From time to time she would utter the words, "Oh God."

The words were uttered. Although spoken quietly, they were not really spoken at all, but drawn forth in a tone that was joyful beyond joy and sorrowful beyond sorrow, a tone so unlike any pronouncements heard in formal religious services that the possibility of the words being prayer did not at first consciously occur to me. I was even somewhat perplexed, since I knew that my grandmother was not given to vain speech. It was not for some years that I came to understand that she was simply praying.

Holding up our lives

This understanding came not by sudden enlightenment but by a slow seeping of her life into my own. She lived not on her own terms but in terms of the people she loved, and her affection was omniverous, extending, as I quickly came to know, from myself to the woman catty-cornered across the street who took drugs and sometimes had to have food cooked and carried to her. So great was her regard for persons she loved that she loved without regard for persons. Hence she was the delight of children; she not only cherished them but also treated them as openly and honestly as she did adults. I came at length to learn, for I was not told and did not imagine asking, that what went on in the rocking chair was some sort of intensification of what went on in the rest of her life, and that this intensification was, in fact, prayer. What indeed is prayer but the simple holding up of our lives to the light of Truth?

Simple prayer unites with others

Nowadays, I try to pray as my grandmother prayed — secretly and quietly — and I know that it is she I imitate, not because we talked about it (it was not once discussed), but because the events remembered from childhood helped draw me towards simple prayer, simple prayer of the sort that unites those who pray in the hidden manner. It is prayer

with decreasing thought of self, and if any who practice it open their lives to illustrate it, it is to point to prayer and not self.

What public prayer is private prayer is not

Prayer, this sort of prayer, is not at all the same thing as public prayer, which differs not only in manner but in kind. Public prayer is a speaking, often of great value, about God. It deals tersely and tremendously with themes too vast for a statement or a sermon. But such communication, while it may reveal something about God, reveals nothing to him (unless he be thought to be a recluse who, unless specifically informed, lacks knowledge of what is going on). It is intended to instruct human beings. The instruction is about God rather than of God, and only formally are the words addressed to him. Great public prayers are eloquent rather than halting, coherent rather than fragmented. They should be, if they are to be deeply educational. When they are such, they can be incomparable preludes to private devotions, but precisely what public prayer is private prayer is not. Be it remembered that Moses, finder of the ever-present God, is three times presented to us in the book of Exodus as a clumsy speaker, i.e., a stammerer. Rare indeed is the vocal prayer that in words reveals to God the hidden heart of him who prays, as do, for instance, many of the agonized cries of the Psalms, the simple utterances of St. Francis, the fevered demands of the Hasidim, or the Lord's Prayer and those two beyond-words vocalizations, "I believe, help thou my unbelief," and "Lord have mercy on me a sinner."

Small troubles and great crises

But prayer is just as social as it is secret. If we call out to the Everpresent, our cry echoes throughout his creation, sometimes to return to confuse our ears. Most often, our prayers ricochet against the small troubles of daily life that involve persons among whom we live. And that is the life of prayer as it should be. But prayer, even as it relates to the everyday, also takes much of its tone from the great social crises and catastrophes in the life that surrounds those who pray.

The social purview of my grandmother centered on the last half of the nineteenth century, but it also extended backwards to the pioneer vistas of her grandparents and forward to the First World War and the beginnings of the Great Depression. From time to time during her later years, she would say aloud, "Oh the war" or "oh the depression." It was not that she had suddenly enlarged her spiritual purview to include social causes. It was, rather, that the content of her life was what was happening to people around her and not what was happening to her. The idea of living for herself seemed not to occur to her. The inward life of prayer had become unceasingly linked with outward reality.

2. Prayer answers violence

The social purview of those who pray today includes more horrifying cataclysms. How we pray depends greatly, I suspect, on how we react to two of the spiritually most shocking events of the midpart of this century: the imminence of the threat of atomic annihilation and the reality of the extermination of six million European Jews.

Instead of salvation, death

The great majority of those whom Hitler killed were pious people from small towns, the possessors of no more than small means and small occupations. Steadfast men, women, and children, they gave repeated utterance to great and even ecstatic prayers. They strove to turn to God; they aimed to sanctify each aspect of their lives. And their particular prayer for the future was the coming of the Messiah.

Instead, came Hitler. And yet these innocents, by the hundreds of thousands, glorified God in the very cattle cars that carried them to death, praying, singing, and even dancing. ("Though he slay me, yet shall I love him.")

Instead of life, extermination

Meanwhile the slaughter of other innocents in Russia continued on a large scale, and in China similar slaughter began. And then, in the midst of this violence, there suddenly were let loose new weapons of enormous destructiveness, the various atomic bombs of ever-increasing force that made a literal and factual possibility of the end of the world: not according to the vision of the early prophets ("I shall destroy all things from off the earth"), but according to the lack of vision of men generally. Even now these weapons cannot be kept from threatening the existence of life upon the planet, whether the weapons be used accidentally or psychotically.

From the beginning of the proliferation, still and small voices have been raised against the multiplying force of violence, atomic or otherwise. In interesting unanimity, these voices have declared that it is not by making war or making leagues that the force of weapons can be neutralized, but only by a recrudescence of true religion and world-wide prayer.

Prayer the one alternative

Prominent among these voices have been those who in our time have made religion new; the Mohandas Gandhis, the Albert Schweitzers, and the Martin Bubers among us who have raised their voices against violence and oppression and deceit. Gandhi, for example, very literally saw prayer as the only alternative to the twin catastrophes of totalitarianism and atomic warfare. His call, to men and women of all faiths, was to trust in the power of Truth and in a deep sense of the experienced reality of God: ". . . I am surer of his existence than of the fact that you and I are sitting in this room."

Inward experience led him to see prayer as greater than the outward powers of war and oppression, and in the way of life derived from prayer he saw the hope of a world set free by Truth, Truth that goes beyond differences in custom, culture, and belief to bring deliverance from evil. Gandhi said, ". . . the light within me is clear and steady. There is no escape for any of us save through Truth and non-violence."

Prayerful Voices

Similarly inward experience led Carl Evans in 1949 to the founding of Fellowship in Prayer and to the bringing together in it of such persons as William Ernest Hocking, Leighton Stuart, William Hung, Roy Wallace Thomas, Kenneth Ch'en, Serle Bates, and Kathryn Brown. Carl Evans' call, to men and women of all faiths, was to unleash the power of God as a force capable of overcoming threats of tyranny and annihilation. Restating historic Quaker themes, Thomas Kelly, Howard Brinton, and Douglas Steere gave new emphasis beginning in the 1940's to the reality of the spiritual life and to its utility in personal and social affairs. And during the same decade, Alcoholics Anonymous came into being as a new social force, co-founder Bill W. finding the power of God to be triumphant over the disease and its accompanying ravages of mind and spirit.

The threat of cataclysmic destruction is probably greater today than ever, partly because the general public thinks less often about totalitarianism and has lived long enough with the atomic threat for it to seem remote, but largely because of the weakness with which many persons of good will live and pray. Moreover, there has been an increase in types of violence that are less catastrophic than bombs but just as pervasive: violence in the streets and in our own hearts, in the form of fears, tensions, guilts, rages, addictions, depressions, frustrations, and alienations, all admixed with distressing sensations of inadequacy and supremacy.

What does God hear?

Can prayer overcome violence of these intense and widespread sorts? If God is not deaf to prayer, why does he not heed the cries of his children for deliverance from violence, outward and inward? Does God hear at all? Was he of any use to the Jews who glorified him and were exterminated, he who promised to be of use to the ends of the earth, who pledged to give when asked and to listen when called upon, he whose promises are tried and true, who teaches any who go astray, teaching even during the night, who is a refuge for us, and from whose love nothing can ever separate us?

The problem of prayer is not the possibility that creation may vanish from the face of the earth. From the time of the early prophets, it has been understood that the end of the

world is not the end of God, any more than the end of our physical life on earth is necessarily the end of our being linked to him. The problem is not the end of all things, but the co-existence of some very good things with other things violently evil.

3. Prayer itself is a deliverance

No out-of-hand deliverance

Prayer may indeed be the answer to violence, but God does not deliver us out of hand from such difficulties. The deliverance wrought by prayer is of a sort entirely different from that proclaimed by hypocrites who believe God looks after their selfish interests. The deliverance is an inward rescue, not an outward one, and the profound effect of prayer in the world of history results not from divine intervention of a physical sort but from the new and powerful way of life followed by men and women who have been inwardly touched by the power of Truth.

But what deliverance can there be when there are sickening acts of violence? Was God deaf to the prayers of men and women and children slaughtered by the Nazis? The unthinkable has been imagined by some people who say that God permitted Hitler because he wanted to punish the Jews for the transgression of being Jewish, but such grotesque self-righteousness is antithetical to everything prayer teaches of God. When we pray truly, we are part of a humanity united, inwardly at least, by one another's pain; and the trials and sufferings of the Jews or of any oppressed people are our own trials and sufferings, and no outward difference of any sort can separate us from them.

Any suffering is our suffering

In like manner, less dramatic cases of suffering are nonetheless our suffering: the starvation of little children is our starvation; so is the suffering of persons born witless, of persons lost to reason, of persons imprisoned by the pain of sickness, of persons whose faces are ground by oppression. How can God let these things happen?

This question rephrases the eternal question that rises whenever there is violence or injustice or sickness or death. Our inward experience of the God to whom we pray is of a God of love, and we do not know how suffering comes into his world, except that it is, like all things else, *his* creation. Invariably we are led to relieve suffering and to work against violence; and invariably we are conscious, in the deepest moments of our suffering, of the presence of the One by whom we are created and by whom we are loved. His creation

is such that there is suffering in it and at the same time love and comfort for the sufferer. Is it not written, "He loveth whom he chasteneth?"

We know God's presence, not his purposes

At this point, not only the answers we seek but the very questions we ask go beyond the limits of our comprehension, and we are confronted by the inexplicable wonder of that Truth which is God. We have no tongues to state ultimate questions and no ears to hear definitive responses. But humbly we can begin to sense (rather than understand) that God appears not to intervene in his physical creation, not to call up or call off earthquakes, plagues, wars, and commotions, and certainly not to direct them personally against this or that group of men and women or against this or that individual person. His ways are not our ways, and our plans are not his plans.

We are given to know his presence, but not his purposes, let alone his nature (if it is conceivable that he has such things as nature and purposes). Is he not the Eternal, the Everpresent, the Nameless, the Unknown, the Undefined? God is indeed far greater than he appears to any of us, but since the time of the later prophets of Israel, men and women have sensed that, while his presence pervades every aspect of life, his intervention occurs in the realm of the spirit (so far at least as we are able to be aware of it).

We are his hands

If we had prayed enough, would God have prevented Hitler or made uninventable the atom bomb? There appear to be no such easy outs. We are led by great teachers of all faiths and by the inward Teacher himself to surmise that the effect of God's spiritual intervention is to direct *us* to labor within the material and historical realms of this world for an end of oppression and violence. We are his hands.

Our hearts are his because we know his healing presence, but if our hands are not his, it is clear that he will intervene no further. If God did not intervene physically for six million Jews, he will not intervene physically for us against the atomic bombs. Nor will he intervene spiritually, so that our hands are motivated by our hearts, unless we ask him. He does not lead us to Truth by force or manipulation; he does not handle us like puppets. He permits us, indeed, to make our own mistakes. But it is the testimony of hundreds of generations of men and women that if we are willing to listen, he is willing to lead.

The nature of this leading is the nature of prayer and meditation. In contrast to the credos of reason, prayer is strictly our experience of religion. The Truth revealed by it is not doctrine or belief, but the living center of reality. Not

only does spiritual religion arise out of prayer; both it and prayer itself arise out of the whole experience of living, including the conscious, unconscious, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical aspects of our beings. We come to sense something of Truth by communicating with it on all levels. People throughout the world often believe differently, but very much more often they pray alike.

Everpresent but not evermeddling

Particularly they pray, "Thy will be done." In so praying, they are united in a spiritual reality that includes conscious reason but exists beyond it, one that leads both to a ready acceptance of life as it is and to a willingness to change it as moved by inward direction. Reason, to be sure, often constructs theologies that enshrine such evils as violence, oppression, and grinding the face of the poor. These it falsely and usually self-servingly identifies with divine manipulation of the world of everyday life. But the heart of prayer forever reveals that the Everpresent is in no way the evermeddling.

By prayer be used

In the face of the evil around us and within us (the two types are linked), we can only experiment with prayer, trusting that we may learn something of it as a spiritual weapon and as a spiritual defense. We are then likely to sense that small acts of love and trust may in God's time have greater meaning than the disasters that called them forth. The fact of Jews singing on their way to death is more important than the horrors that they faced physically, and the deeply moved prayers of small groups of men and women challenging violence are greater prime movers than all the atom bombs. Clearly we must learn prayer and meditation that we may use them right and may, in turn, by them be used.

4. Prayer is

Superstition in place of Truth

But before considering what prayer and meditation are, there must be some inward certainty that they exist. Many persons nowadays believe that there is no God and therefore no prayer, only some sort of self-induced brainwashing. Other persons say that God may be, but that there can be no prayer because the subject of it is so removed as to render communication inconceivable. These denials are subtly reinforced by the spiritual sloth of other persons, myself among them, who accept God and prayer only part of the time.

As in other ages of extreme credulity, the multiplicity of current superstitions, popular and intellectual, leaves little room for Truth, for the God who is Truth. It is now possible to go in for astrology, augury by means of straws or pennies,

necromancy of a variety of sorts (not excluding what is claimed to be witchcraft), and belief in extra-terrestrial super-intelligences. Sometimes such irrationality is combined with uncritical belief in the assumptions, preconceptions, hypotheses, theories, and theorums of physical science, but now there is often rejection of such science on the grounds of its factuality. A crude belief in fads combines with the notion that this day is intellectually in advance on all topics of all previous days, so that whatever is said today is bound to be as correct as whatever was said yesterday is bound to be in error. The combination of superstitions makes it difficult to perceive the simplicity of Truth, or even to take offense at it on such occasions as it is perceived.

Living as if

Looking at the obstacles we erect so that we can hide from God and avoid prayer is troublesome, tedious, and exhausting even. Yet this effort must be made, step by step, or we will compromise Truth and begin to abandon hope of its stirrings within us. Truth, in its hidden forms, is actually strong among us. Men and women who doubt it continue to live their lives as if things were indeed true and as if life itself were indeed meaningful. For apostles of meaninglessness are forever making meaningful statements about meaninglessness, just as the deniers of Truth are forever insisting on the truth of their denials — or just as loners are often gathering together to consider jointly their aloneness. We are kept alive and protected from an utter despair that goes beyond the limits of out-of-reach insanity because we draw sustenance unconsciously from the Truth that our faddish intellects reject. Indeed, the spiritual life is still active among us; it has only been forced, much of it at least, into the unconscious, where it flourishes even while the conscious mind denies it.

Self-will saps Truth

But it is also at the mercy of other elements of the unconscious, notably those conventional practices, learned so young that they have the force of conscience, which result from seeing oneself as the center of the universe. For self-will is the basis of most of the superstitious fads of the day, including the unreligion that passes as unreligion, the unreligion that passes as religion, and even the new unreligion that passes as faith.

As concentration of self increases among us, and as each person becomes more and more the center of the universe, the sense of Truth becomes weakened: truth not only as it pertains to the large but also as it attaches to the small. The experimental sciences appeared in an age when there was faith in factual reality: in the sense of something existently real in itself and not a personal and subjective consideration. When each person more

and more considers his egocentric self the source of truth, facts easily cease to be obdurate facts and become personal considerations, as they do in not a few recent research projects, of a supposedly scientific character. When fact is thus weakened and self enhanced, superstition flourishes. For what is superstition but a series of devices that aim to make creation do what we personally want? When the truth that comes from Truth is no longer available, even atheism suffers. Nothing can be certain.

Fact alone enables me to deny fact

Temporary atheism — the state of being temporarily without God — also sheds light on the clash between self and Truth, for this condition is common among most people except for the spiritually smug. From time to time, persons attached to Truth slip away from it and find themselves in uncomfortable separation from it. It is the testimony of such persons not that fact has ceased to be but rather that they themselves have fallen back into the conventional habit of thinking that their existence, not reality, is the pivot of the universe. They have found that it is not possible to trust either in fact or in God while trusting first of all in themselves.

As for myself, I find that I desert God and fact not only to make myself the center of life but also to make myself its judge. I declare against God by declaring against him the suffering and evil in the world, forgetting, of course, that his is the original word that declares against suffering and evil, and that I am merely trying to ape him. I have only God to attack God. Then I announce to myself that the universe and all that goes on within it is too much for an intelligence of any sort, and that it must have come about by itself, forgetting, to be sure, that this latter eventuality is even more miraculous than creation by something comparable to Divine intelligence.

I have chosen perversely to go off by myself, but I have found that I do not like my own company. I have lost a sense of surrounding fact; I feel slightly unreal. The reality of what is and what goes on in it is too tremendous by far for me to have anything other than acceptance of it. And the ridiculousness of trying to establish superiority over it is so enormous that eventually I have to laugh at the enormity as well as the pain of it. And so I turn back again, if not to God at least toward his facts, weeping from humor and pain.

Amoeba vs. elephant? Not even that!

For the humor of separation from God is indeed as great as the pain. I am a man of normally weak intellect, whose understanding of reality cannot be compared to Reality itself, even if the difference between us were no greater than that between an amoeba and an elephant. Finite compares with finite, not with infinite. And yet I hold forth on what I cannot take in. I ask why the universe is or what it is or how it came

about. I even state what I would do with what I am incapable even of talking about. I am like a supernumerary employee who declares that there can be no shopkeeper because he himself is in the shop. Indeed, I am no closer to the shop than outside looking in, but I am willing to declare in my egocentrism that there is not room for me and God in the same place and that God will have to go!

Not worshipping leads to self-worshipping

In short, when I have separated myself from God and concluded that creation lacks sense, I have simply reattached myself to my self-centeredness. Likewise when I lament to myself that life treats me unfairly, I have simply refused to see that evil lies not in what happens to me but in my reaction to what happens. How, I ask myself, can what happens happen to one who must be the center of the universe? Self-worship is the inevitable consequence of inability to worship God.

But oh how difficult it is to convey this simple fact of experience! The reality of the creation around us is so beyond words and the problem of the self-centered will is so hidden that the relationship between self and creation is inexplicable. To explain it in words would be to explain the Undefined, the Incommensurate, the Inexplicable, the Unknown who is not an object of cogitation or of any other activity that can be considered thought. (How can the Source of cogitation, not to mention all things else, be its object?) It would also be to call to account him to whom we are accountable, not vice versa. It is impossible to fully explain ourselves, let alone him.

To know is to be intimate with

But it is possible to know him, if this verb be used to mean *intimacy with* rather than *comprehension of*, just as it is possible to be intimate with the people around us when we are not making a conscious effort to understand them. And certainly it is possible to realize that few human beings grow in truth without backsliding into self-centeredness. Indeed, without the pain of backsliding there would not be the joy of growth, nor the certainty that there is God and truth and meaning.

If these exist, how can it be said that there cannot be communication between the human and the divine? To suggest that anything is impossible to him who spoke and the universe was and is (increasing or decreasing, whichever the case may be, at rates incomprehensible in their daily enormity); to suggest that anything, literally any thing, is beyond the capacity of him who has created all that there is and who continues to create all that there will be, including sticks and stones and plants and animals and people and galaxies, and universes within universes: to suggest this is to overlook

the fact that God is so unimaginably limitless that it makes no sense to try limiting him. Prayer is obviously possible.

Inward awareness

As a reality, it arises from a level of awareness that is at once broader and deeper than cogitation. This level includes reason and the conscious, but also emotion and the unconscious, together with every aspect of mind and body, muscles and nerve, liver and lights, spirit and matter: in short, an awareness that involves the entire human personality. It has endlessly served the human race in its dealings with Reality, at least until our own age, in its self-centeredness, chose to abstract conscious reason out of it.

It is a level of total awareness, and from it humanity's practice of prayer has arisen. It was on this level that I began learning prayer from my grandmother, that I first found myself attempting it, and that I am now repeatedly being recalled to its practice. Above all, it was on this level that I came to sense a reality that was beyond all sensing. It is from inward experience that we learn worship and prayer, and we can declare their truth only, and supremely, as inescapable facts of existence, for there is no order of intellectual logic that pertains to them. When Gandhi said that he was as certain of the reality of prayer as he was of the reality of human conversation, he expressed the continuing urge of the whole race of man to grow in Truth, beginning with the simple discovery that the first spiritual fact of being human is not knowing God but being known by him. He hears and responds.

A fact of experience and a fact of history

For if we are known by him, we are taught by him, and we find truth not by agitated intellectualizing and moralizing and sermonizing and like activities requiring special aptitude, special training, and special skill, but by being still and knowing that God is indeed God: in other words, by letting God take full possession of us, whether we are learned or unlettered, vocal or quiet, bright or stupid.

It is thus, I suspect, that we come to know life as meaningful. What the precise meaning is, we do not know. We know meaningfulness in being with other people at home and at work, meaningfulness in being in the midst of nature, meaningfulness in crying out to God, and meaningfulness in the inexplicable panorama of existence on earth. Whatever may be the meaning of history, or the lack of it, it is evident that there is growth, constant if not steady, of man's awareness of the chief relationship of his life: God and God's creation. Why growth involves all the horrors of history, we shall not know. But we shall know that it is of greater import to us than all history's horrors. Prayer is. It is a fact of experience and a fact of history.

5. Thy own will is deceit

Before we can make prayer a fact of our own experience, we must further unlearn old habits of self-will. Our false selves can tell us that there cannot be prayer, and this may be unfortunate. But our false selves can also tell us that we are god-like, that our wills should be part of our prayers, and this is disastrous.

When not addressed, God does not hear

However much such egocentric prayers may vary in wording, they usually are the same in theme, namely, "My will be done." And, typically, they are not so much addressed to God as they are to a fetish, a self-image misidentified as God. God obviously does not hear. He is not truly addressed. Indeed, there is an effort not so much at prayer as there is at magic, which, be it remembered, is an attempt to manipulate the universe into following one's own will. The stance of a man on his knees praying to himself is at best ludicrous.

A person in this posture relates to himself everything that happens. What other people think or feel is unimportant to him, unless they are thinking about him, as he secretly imagines they often do, for he is convinced that he is special and outstanding. Indeed, he will go to extreme lengths to convince himself that he is either greatly above or greatly below someone else — inferiority serves him as well as superiority, as it does those exhibitionists who commit crimes to get attention — when all the time, in the eyes of Truth, he is exactly the same height. He imagines a different altitude because, as the center of the universe, he thinks he must be distinctive enough to keep the universe functioning.

Addressing one's self

Of the enormity of such egocentrism, we are generally unaware. A basic human problem, it has also been a special and intense problem of Western civilization throughout the past six or so centuries, and even now when ego roles and rules are beginning to be questioned as needlessly painful, egocentrism is being crudely universalized among nations and peoples who have not heretofore been part of Western culture, such as the Japanese abroad or the poor at home, who are only just starting to live by Western standards, which have now been reduced into simplistic me-first terms.

The absurdity of considering oneself the center of the universe is not readily understood when one has been constantly exposed to such a notion from infancy and has observed it from a time prior to conscious memory. Visions of success and self-reliance swim so easily in the head that they seem to be laws of human conduct. They are very seldom seen in the light of their consequences, which include

compulsions, addictions, and neuroses with all their attendant fears, worries, guilts, depressions, rages, and alienations.

Don't give up the agony

The self-centeredness that cuts man off from man cuts him off also from God and from the reality of God's creation, so that even if he tries to pray, he can pray only to himself. He must try to direct things himself, control things himself. But then his subjective desires become so much the measures of all things that he cannot look at things as they are without unconsciously altering them to suit himself. His very neuroses and addictions and compulsions are interposed between himself and reality, like a filter that removes whatever is too much for his self-attachment, making it difficult for him to coexist with things as they are and impossible to come to factual terms with them. For all the agony of his fears and rages and depressions and guilts, he does not want to give up these adaptive mechanisms. Giving them up, if he truly wanted to, would be relatively easy. But he wants to give up only the pain that accompanies them. Giving that up alone is impossible; he is caught in the pursuit of unreality, and his pain and aloneness increase.

Self-will makes belief resemble unbelief

In such a state of egocentric befuddlement, some people believe they are pursuing Truth when they are only stirring up emotionalism: not true religious enthusiasm or even worldly excitement, but rather adrenalism, nervous stimulation, and pseudo-sexual tension of the sort aroused by television dramas and camp meetings. Others misidentify Truth with dourness, rigidity, narrow scrupulosity, guilt, and self-righteousness, any and all of which they recommend as acts of faith and adjuncts to prayer.

Let it not be thought that the way of Truth is strong among those who profess belief, and that the way of deceit is strong among those who profess unbelief. The deceit of self-will is strong among both. In the life of prayer, Truth and deceit result not from intellectual beliefs or disbeliefs but from the operations of every aspect of a human being: body and spirit, emotions, dreams, insights, and finally, reason. Indeed, one of deceit's principal signs is a demand for intellectual or theological purity of a dogmatic character.

The practice of non-prayer

Deceit encourages us to strike the attitudes and mouth the words of prayer without praying at all. We engage in non-prayer, calling out our demands and letting it be known that our wishes are to be heeded. We implore that life be reordered to suit us, that events turn out the way we want, that the universe connive against those we are angry at, that God smile upon us in our high-minded self-righteousness, and that he recognize our godliness with peace of mind, health of body, and affluence of purse. Or we may hanker

for poor-me self-satisfactions of an opposite sort and insist on divine recognition and approval of our poverty of mind and pocket, and of our loneliness and guilt.

Born again without first having died

Currently there appears to be a new wave of self-congratulatory invocation based upon being born again without first having died to self-will. Another wave of self-important prayer (it is not intercessory prayer) is based on meddling in other people's lives by undertaking to vocalize them out of their difficulties and deficiencies. And beyond these instances of ordinary self-deceit, there is a supplication that is a vaunting up of oneself and one's group by a noxious compound of hate and violence and brutality and oppression, such as occurred when so-called pious people bowed their heads for Hitler or when they meditate violence today.

Egocentrism is in many ways a cultural choice made for us by distant ancestors and repeated for us by ancestors more immediate. But the choice is always ours. Nothing requires us to live at the mercy of our unconsciouses. It is a certainty that God will get rid of false self for us, indeed that he will get rid of it even if he is asked only a little more than half-heartedly. The goodness of God is shown in his calling us to come forth from emotional sickness and spiritual slavery.

Finding your self means losing your life

And yet, precisely at a time when people are becoming sick of self-will, self-will is being propagandized in dozens of new therapies, which typically promise the alleviation of ego pain through the practice of new aspects of egocentrism, such as self-assertiveness, self-expression, self-analysis, identity-finding, sensitivity, encounter, consciousness-raising, transcendental meditation, bastardized forms of religion, and self-examination of the *mea culpa* sort. A common aim is finding oneself, and in the pursuit of it the patient is supposed to let his emotions all hang out, notably his anger, the emission of which, in quantum-like spurts, is held to be essential to true self-realization.

Let me not find myself

All this is a great deal of self-centered nonsense of a profoundly pathetic type, for when we engage in it, what we seek eludes us. We need not to find ourselves but to find God and our neighbor. But it is nonsense so pervasive that it is wise to recall that in other times and places and in all of the higher religions, he who saves his life shall lose it, while he who loses his life shall save it: an observation that is not so much a moral rule as a psychological fact. Let me *not* find myself. Let me become willing to be found. It is possible to be found. Alongside the egocentrism of our cultural tradition, there has long existed a tradition of turning to God and of seeking not oneself but one's neighbor. There is always

the ageless way of the prophets. For all the compulsiveness of our addiction to self, it is relatively easy to be delivered from it once one is genuinely willing. Then I need not find myself, and I become willing for God to find me. And then I become willing to pray.

6. Keep prayer simple

Flattery, condescension, and cogitation

It is said that whoever can talk can pray, but that whoever talks least prays best. Great prayers are simple: witness the cries of the Psalms, the brief petitions of the Gospels. Such prayers are universal, unconditional, understandable by persons of all conditions. There is always, however, the temptation to employ high and intricate language spoken in full tones and a rising inflection, and to engage in flattery and condescension: often used when congratulating God on the state of the weather.

There is also the temptation to launch into homilies on current affairs and to explain to God how he can settle selected problems of society. It is recorded that one prayer at least began with the words, "Oh Lord, as thou has doubtless seen in this morning's *Times* . . ." Of somewhat the same pointless involvement are cogitation prayers, wherein God is given a grounding in theology and told what he is like. It is important to take such lapses humorously in order not to take them seriously. We shall never pray entirely aright, and nothing can get more in the way of right prayer than resentment and guilt.

Praying that requires study of praying

Far different from flowery prayer is mystical prayer. It typically seeks disinvolvement from worldly conventions and cultural acccouterments. Some of its forms, indeed, are purposely out of this world. But, to the extent they are such, they seem to increase in complexity rather than simplicity. In some forms, for example, it is necessary to climb a spiritual ladder, progressing from one rung to another and passing from simple petitionary prayer through praise and adoration to contemplation, speculation, and union with the Godhead. For such purposes, it is necessary to employ techniques of prayer that can be learned not so much by praying among other praying persons but by studying about praying: studying at a level of complexity that is too great for children, the unlettered, or the less well circumstanced, who necessarily lack time and facilities for it.

The question is not whether prayer of this sort is possible or valid. Possibility and validity appear to be facts of true

inward experience. The question is whether mystical prayer of an out-of-creation type is appropriate: appropriate at a time of inward perturbations and outward disorders, a time when God's creation is under threat of catastrophe.

Death from ecstasy

Actually, not a few men and women of prayer who have ventured into the realm beyond time and space have declined to stay in it. Martin Buber reports that during a time in his life when "illumination, ecstasy, and rapture held," he failed to be present in spirit when he was visited by a young man desperate to find meaning in life. The young man subsequently died. Buber thereupon gave up the "religious," or else, he said, it gave him up. "I possess nothing," he subsequently wrote, "but the everyday out of which I am never taken."

Early Quaker Isaac Penington reports that "light sprang within me . . . so that every thing was sweet and pleasant and lightsome round about me. But . . . this estate was too high and glorious for me, and I was not able to abide it . . . I prayed unto [God] to take that from me which I was not able to bear, and to give me such a proportion of his light and presence as was suitable to my present state and might fit me for his service." Hasidistic teacher Zusya of Hanipol reports an almost identical experience. It is said that Zusya crawled under the bed like a little dog and fear shook him until he prayed to be Zusya again. The stillness of imagined spiritual union may be simply the deafness of exhaustion.

Ecstasy and exhaustion

In certain of its forms, mystical prayer departs from the everyday: the everyday creation in which love of God is inseparable from love for actual men, women, and children, in which the power of Truth calls us in the ordinary frustrations of emotion and spirit and there shows us the Everpresent. Creation is not to be served by the renunciation of it. It may well be that God now calls upon us to let him be active through us here and now in the redemption of our threatened corner of creation. For of what conceivable use is it now for us to go off in a corner to be with God when we have put his earth in such peril that only a total turning, personal and social, from our self-centered way of living can rescue it?

Ecstatic deceit

When we depart from the everyday, it is easy to imagine a closeness to God of an uncommon sort, and in imagined closeness we may lead ourselves to believe that we understand God and sit at his right hand. In this state of deceit, egocentric musing and self-analysis can pass for prayer. Meditation then can become merely a gloss upon basically egocentric ruminations about the nature of the self and its union with the All. True mysticism calls for the renunciation of self, but it is only too easy to confuse the idea of it with

the actuality of it. It is difficult to think oneself at one with the timeless ground of Being without imagining oneself at the center of the universe.

Ego egocentrically renounced remains ego

For myself, I can think of no time of my life when I was more egocentric than when I believed I had successfully renounced ego. I was at the time suffering actively from addictions and neuroses, yet in pursuing prayer of a mystical type I experienced a small and, I thought, unmistakable sense of the presence of the divine, so that my being was from time to time quieted of its perplexities, and thought and emotion seemed totally stilled. But I was lifted out of my befuddlements only to be dropped back into them. The experiences may well have been real — God is not shy of informing us of his presence, particularly at times when our spirit is sick — but they proved fruitless.

There is indeed a way, I have since learned, of letting go of self-will by turning it over to God and to one's neighbor: the straight-forward way whereby repeated dying to self leads to saving from self. But that way is not abnegation, which is a sort of extirpation that requires negativism of such an extreme order that it can lead back to what it is trying to escape from. Revulsion towards the human condition turns attention to self and revulsion towards one's own evil rivets attention on self. Stronger than high ego is low ego.

Altering consciousness

Some states called mystical, moreover, are states of altered consciousness, in which one feels literally out of this world. These states can be produced by sleeplessness, fasting, and flagellation as well as by prayer, and they can be produced also by alcohol and drugs. When thus produced, altered consciousness can become a goal in itself, although it may be no more than a chemical high. The sensation of it can become so overwhelming and so world-removing that the sensation is sought in preference to God.

Prayer and reality

Clearly, prayer that ventures into this area of mood-expansion cannot be simple. And if true prayer be a meeting of God with man, such prayer cannot be true. In true prayer, we seek to put ourselves in touch with Reality, not alone in its ultimate form but also in its everyday manifestations in people, events, and things, all of which exist factually and not in a subjective relationship to us.

Talking to oneself and thinking one is talking to God are common nowadays because many of us believe that God exists nowhere but inside us and that he is easy of access to us. And, of course, our experience of him *is* inward, but if we imagine him to be inward only, if we limit him to a personal area, we make of him our creation. We come to believe that

God is only an emotion within us, and that we are in truth the creators of God and thus creators of values. In this way we take leave of Reality, for we condemn ourselves to fitting whatever is and whatever happens into our own scheme of values. We then see things as they relate to us; we cut ourselves loose from things as they are; we pray to ourselves.

Let prayer be simple!

It is very difficult to label false anything of any nature that is addressed to God. Undoubtedly there has been effective out-of-this-world prayer. Yet my own particular use of it I cannot call anything but deceitful. It was an exercise of the cogitation, an effort to control. Not for me, under the influence of such deceits, were simple prayers as uttered by simple people. Was I to cry out, "I believe, help thou my unbelief," I who had entered the eighth, tenth, or fourteenth stage of educated rapture? Indeed, complicated, well-informed, upper-class prayer of the sort I was snobbishly performing was utterly out of the ordinary. It was based on a suitable education in the historical and theological aspects of itself, and it climbed step-by-step into high areas of speculative complexity, where only the select few imagine themselves able to follow.

Let prayer be simple! Prayer that arises out of the deep simplicity of Truth is invariably linked with everyday matters, not with our opinions, ideas, notions, and cogitations about our role in the universe. True prayer and meditation put us in touch with what is going on, outwardly and inwardly, and with what is going on in the hearts of those who simply pray; and our closeness to the Creator becomes more intimate through awareness of his creation. For this day at least, let there be awe rather than adoration, acceptance rather than speculation, obedience rather than union, and surrender rather than rapture.

7. Prayer is first of all surrender

Turn it over!

Prayer is a precious habitation, but before we enter it we must know that it is God's habitation not ours. Otherwise we will never be able to get in. We may imagine that we have a key to it and that we are actually inside, when all the time we are still out in the cold. If prayer is to be anything other than worship of self and success, there must be surrender, so that we see God and not ourselves as the center of the universe. Our entire beings must cry out, "I give up," and must keep on crying out if we are to move out of slavery to self-will.

At first surrender can hardly be total, but it must be

total in intention. It demands a turning to God and a turning over of our own selves, our own wills, our entire beings, including all problems, all frustrations, all contentions, inward and outward, and all our ills. It also means a turning over and a throwing away of our insistence that things turn out the way we egocentrically want. It means a renunciation of self-seeking prayers. Finally, it means getting rid of egocentrism by means that are not egocentric. Self-will is of no use in banishing self-will. We must reach out for help.

Through defeat, liberation

This is a losing of self that, before it happens, seems both difficult and painful. It seems to involve a very annihilation of our being, for we live as if we were made up of nothing more than self-centered wants and perplexities. And indeed there can be no lasting strength of spirit without undergoing complete self-defeat. But defeat, once welcomed, turns out to be easy. What follows is not extinction or even self-abnegation but inward liberation, a new attitude, a new way of life, a new surge of joy. He who loses his life does save it. He loses the misery of living first of all for himself.

Such surrender involves six, at least, necessary steps:

Give up playing God

1) Surrender must include, first of all, a giving up of our desire to play God. To this end, we pray constantly to be delivered from self-will. Whenever we are tempted to assert or impose our own wills, we pray to be teachable rather than to teach. We pray to give up whatever it is that separates us from the Truth which is God, including our neurotic attachments and our ideas of failure and success.

Give up specific ills

2) Surrender must be specific. Our egocentric willfulness is expressed in distinct patterns of mind and emotion and body, including guilts, worries, evasions, fears, sulks, depressions, grandiosities, shames, rages, isolations, and like deceits, all of which are made known to us in specific circumstances of life. For a start, it is well to be willing to give up self-will in general, but progress in deliverance from it requires willingness to give up the habits of mind and the sensations of body through which it has long expressed itself in the actual situations in which we live. Self-will is most quickly and exactly identified in terms of such situations. Indeed, there is no certain way of getting rid of our general malaise without surrendering specific faults to God and our neighbor.

Give up repeatedly

3) Surrender must be repeated. It is no once-in-a-lifetime event. So attached are we to our false selves that, once we have in some measure given them up, we are ready to start taking them back. There is no instantaneous arrival at spiritual maturity; possibly there is no arrival at all. Arriving somewhere seems to be of minor importance compared with

having somewhere to go. Better is growth: a continuing series of repeated daily and more-often-than-daily surrenders.

Give up low ego as well as high ego

4) Surrender must include what is popularly called low ego as well as what is called high ego. Riddance is sought of what centers self on self, and self centers powerfully on self through convictions of being the lowest of the low, even more powerfully than through convictions of being the highest of the high. Misery, guilt, and unworthiness separate us from God as readily as do their opposites. Guilt, in particular, compels repetition precisely of those errors for which guilt is felt. Too readily we tell tales of sins that we do not allow God to forgive.

Give up to reality

5) Surrender must be made to the God of reality. Our fears, depressions, frustrations, agitations, and befuddlements have not only the consequence of making us miserable but also the function of separating us from reality and of keeping us unaware of the separation. As a result, we want to give up our miseries, typically through devious psychological devices, but we do not want to get rid of the source of them. The source is simply our alienation from things as they are.

Give up to others

6) Surrender must be made not only to God but also to other human beings. Only too easily can I delude myself that I have surrendered myself or specific aspects of myself to God, and then use this delusion to reinforce further separation from him. He is not physically present to correct my error. But my neighbor, my fellow man, is present, and I must find some means, such as therapy groups or prayer workshops, to surrender to him also, not simply because he is present to correct me, but also because he is present for me to love. If we are unable to surrender to man, we are unlikely to surrender to God.

Giving up guilt

7) Surrender makes recovery less difficult than it seemed before surrender because it is effected in a manner sharply different from the conventional manner of improving oneself and others. The conventional manner makes use of guilt and will-power. If a person does wrong, he is supposed to feel — or to be made to feel — guilty about it, and this emotion is supposed to create a will for correction. Guilt, however, is actually experienced inwardly as a falling short, a falling short from perfectionism (and in some cases from personal salvationism). The falling short stirs emotions of inadequacy that block correction of the wrong and leave little alternative but repetition of it. Guilt produces a discomfort that is felt unconsciously as a sufficient punishment for wrong-doing, and the repetition of the act that produces guilt gives an immediate inward thrill of willfully self-controlled

self-importance, as if guilt were being assaulted instead of being given into, whereupon discomfort is again felt. A vicious circle of egocentric emotion ensues, and before long whatever was wrong in the first place is repeated again. The role of will-power and guilt, at least in the Western manner of being, strengthens whatever focuses most sharply on self.

Guilt perpetuates evil

But when a person does wrong and admits it promptly and spontaneously, then he makes a start at giving it up. If the desire to repeat continues, he can repeatedly tell himself, his neighbor, or God — preferably all three — that he is willing to give it up; and in greater or lesser time it will indeed go away. This procedure not only keeps him from egocentric musings about his perfectionism or lack of it; it also enables him to be of some use in God's creation. He seeks to serve God and his neighbor instead of getting his individual self saved. Selective salvationism is the psychological consequence of personal perfectionism. It is not possible to be one of many persons acting as the hands of Truth and, at the same time, to want to be a special being winning medals.

For surrender takes away what we think special about us — what separates us from the people around us — and gives us our true uniqueness, the unrepeatable way of living amidst creation and of serving it that characterizes each human being. Again, he who loses his life does indeed save it. We cannot be lifted up if we are not first brought low.

8. Prayer is a sense of awe

A direct consequence of surrender is a new attitude toward life and a new way of it, in which there is deliverance, often fitful and often slow, from meaninglessness, aloneness, and torment, and from such specific distempers as anxiety, rage, guilt, and depression. Spiritual growth is an irregular process, but it inevitably brings liberation from hurt together with joy of spirit, once one looks to God for these things and not to oneself.

The beginning of wisdom

There is, in short, a clearing the way for a second precondition of prayer: a sense of awe. This sense is already a hidden part of our deepest experiences of life. It is the sense of wonder that suddenly makes grass much greener, that floods hills and valleys with new light, that effects a meeting in our hearts with God and with one another. It is also fear, that fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom: the amazement that things are as they are and not different, that the eyes of a child are the eyes both of a child and of a future

parent of children; and not only that there are such concrete things as eyes but also abstract realities such as constancy and consistency, such wonders as suddenness and unexpectedness. Awe, indeed, is the sense of being overwhelmed by a creation whose least detail is beyond all cogitation and beyond all comprehension, and whose experienced simplicity embraces unimaginable prolixity.

Fear is awe also in the sense that I am demonstrably small while God is indescribably great, and yet God's greatness confers on me goodness whenever I am willing to accept it. Of course it is awe: God is my creator and I am one of billions of his children in one of possibly billions of his worlds.

Creation's just-rightness

In the woods and fields around us are the sticks and stones and trees and bushes of physical creation, and their shape and color and relationship speak a language beyond words. Light flows over the mantle of the earth and flashes in an illumination that shines to the depth of our being. The animals, the birds, the children, even we ourselves: how astonishing are all these creatures, how just-right in their createdness! In the book of Job, the great concluding hymn of awe that returns Job to God contains the phrase "Behold now behemoth!" and follows with fourteen verses on his sinews and bones, his imperturbability and his wallowing in the midst of lushness: "God's very masterpiece."

We and Job may be able to consider the movements of the stars and planets, but in no way can he or we consider creating a hippopotamus! If enthusiasm is to be stirred toward God, it will also be stirred and perhaps first stirred toward the beasts of his creation and the flowers of his fields. Each evidence of the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of creation makes possible fresh and repeated meetings with God as the Unknown, the Undefined, the Nameless, and at the same time the specific, ever-present God of our fathers.

What brings suffering also brings wonder

Once there is awe, we are drawn close to God by those very aspects of his creation from which, before awe, we held back: the blindness of chance, for instance, or the suffering of children or the untimely death of good men and women. When unable to penetrate beyond the limits of our finitude, it is easy to dismiss the Infinite and declare the universe to be a product of chance. And yet to the eye of awe, chance appears to be an amazing creation (God spoke and randomness was), just as suffering can be opportunity and death a healing. Awe is precisely the recognition that things which put us off from God — sickness, violence, destruction — are inescapably part of the wonder of his living creation.

And there is the never-ending wonder that all that is

and will be either was not or is not. It is difficult to conceive of such a thing as utter nothingness, but awe consists in part of an overwhelming emotion stirred by the somethingness that has been brought and is being brought into existence out of the nothingness that surrounds and interpenetrates all things.

With awe for creation there comes the new wonder that conversation is possible with the Creator, and that it becomes possible to experience him, through surrender, as the God of truth and reality, not as the god of my beliefs or imaginings or cogitations. And thus becomes possible prayer, prayer as a fact of human experience, prayer that overcomes evil.

9. Five ways of prayer

Surrender to God, look into his creation, and you will learn directly from him far more than from the words of any language. Our deepest experiences quite literally leave us speechless. They are beyond words. The Taoists say, "He who speaks does not know, and he who knows does not speak." But, of course, these words of truth speak to us. We penetrate from time to time into the realm beyond words only to the extent that we regularly attempt to convey to one another words, spoken and written, that point to our experience of that realm. But let these inadequate words be used with precision. And let them be simple, even as the love of Truth itself is simple, for while there may be nothing more complex than the subject of prayer, there is a deep simplicity about its practice. Hence it may be best to avoid involved analyses of it and keep to direct assertions about it.

Simple assertions

There are innumerable ways of simple prayer and meditation, but I find it helpful to think of no more than five ways, even though all the ways may be only one way. The first begins with a cry for help and healing. The second depends on willingness to accept what happens in the creation around us. The third is a readiness for direction and guidance. The fourth is following a way of life that is itself prayer. The fifth is holding up to God everything that happens.

There may be some manner of progression among these various ways. It would be difficult to follow a way of life that is itself prayer, for instance, had one never cried out for help. And it would be just as difficult to accept what happens without — sooner, later, or at the same time — holding up to God whatever happens. The reality of each of these five ways of prayer and meditation, discussed separately in the chapters that follow, is inseparable from each other way.

10. The first way: the cry for help

The first of the ways of prayer opens out into the four others, for how can any of our prayers reach toward God if we do not sometimes, indeed many times, cry out for help and healing? To be sure, we incline to self instead of God, but who is above help? If Moses, Isaiah, Lao Tzu, Buddha, and Jesus cried out to God, who are we to insist that we help ourselves? If we do so, we are the self-righteous of whom William Penn writes:

Praying for God's will and doing our own

> Those that are not sensible of inward wants, that have no fear nor terrors upon them, who feel no need of God's power to help them, nor of the Light of his countenance to comfort them, what have such as they to do with prayer? They know not, they want not, they desire not what they pray for. They pray that the will of God be done, and do constantly their own.

Thus the first great prayer is simply, "God help me!" The words are, of course, of no use by themselves; they are used often as no more than an exclamation. Of use is the inward attitude behind the words, the sudden realization that life, by its very nature, is totally beyond our individual managing, that we cannot personally control our well-being, physical or spiritual, that we are, left to ourselves, helpless, and that we are indeed "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked."

Self-deceit: the worst sickness

Without God we are without true power, however much we may try to vaunt ourselves with false power. Often we use God's name merely as a cover for our secret snubbing of him. We say, I am in control of life; I am not sick; I am well; and if I am not well, I will get well all by myself. When we speak thus, our inward health resembles the physical health of sufferers from cancer who refuse the help of physicians and declare that they will get well by themselves. Where can there be a person who either has no sickness, physical or spiritual, to recover from or else has the ability to heal his own flesh and straighten his own psyche? The sickness of self-deceit, from which we suffer when we try to be like such a person, may well be the worst sickness there is.

But when self-will finally snaps, when we recognize that we are sick and need help, then we reach out from the confinements of self to God and to other people or, conversely, to other people and, whether we realize it or not, to God. Then begins deliverance from the torments of self. There is

healing, first of all, of the spirit, a healing of the various inward disturbances of anxiety, depression, rage, guilt, and aloneness: precisely those disturbances that shackle us into an endless chain of wretched self-centeredness.

We have to be willing

If we pray to be delivered from the torments that accompany such disturbances without being delivered from the disturbances themselves, we are like an alcoholic who prays to be delivered from hangovers but has no intention of giving up alcohol, or like a manic-depressive who wants to get rid of his lows but keep his highs. In crying out for help, we have to be specific about what is wrong with us; we have to be willing to abandon the particular compulsions and neuroses and addictions behind which we hide in our efforts to keep reality at a distance.

But if we pray, perhaps not wholeheartedly at first but at least halfheartedly, to be delivered from something specific such as guilt, and pray again and again and repeatedly again and again whenever the sensation of guilt comes upon us, committing ourselves each time to God's truth, instead of our own devices, and praying for willingness to give up guilt, then guilt will beyond all doubt ease, and with it will ease other aspects of our interconnected malaise.

We have to reach out

In this way of prayer, there are two basic steps. The initial step is a general call for help, a calling out from the center of that inward pain which is more anguishing than any purely physical illness. The cry is a recognition of the pain and, at the same time, a recognition of an inability to recover from it through exertions of one's own. The cry is a reaching out to whomever can help.

It is a reaching out to God, but it is also a reaching out to other human beings; and the fact that it is indeed directed to God may be entirely outside the conscious understanding of him who cries out. Moreover, for egocentrics like myself, this initial step has to be taken with other human beings, and consciously so taken. When a hidden will to persist in self-isolation vitiates relationship with the Divine, it is important to surrender first of all to persons one physically sees.

To be repeated again and again

The first step is a beginning, an initial turning to Truth with wholeheartedness of intention even if the heart itself is by no means whole. It has to be repeated again and again. Self-will turned over to God can easily be taken back a week, a day, a minute later. The initial step is one that must be made afresh as long as we live. Early on, the pain goes out of the step, and taking it becomes a source of joy. But it has only to be overlooked to put us in danger of tumbling back into pre-surrender anguish with all its pains and perplexities.

The second step is a wholehearted turning over of a specific ill such as guilt or deceit or anxiety or smugness. It too needs repetition and needs it often indeed. But wholeheartedly taken, it produces relatively quick results. The time for this step is precisely the time we are assaulted by the specific ill, whatever it may be. To repeat, it involves telling God, ourselves, and another person or persons, as necessary, that we are willing to give up that specific ill — if only for a brief period of time. When a veritable onslaught of guilt or anxiety or rage or depression threatens, it is useful to seek simply for a delay of it, asking God to keep it away at that present time and repeatedly declaring willingness to give it up. Persistence in such turning over cannot be said to remove the ill — in prayer, we are not prime movers — but it can be said to lead to its removal.

More time and more heart

For there is no instant conversion from spiritual sickness to spiritual health. There is growth, startling growth when we become able to sense it, growth that brings from us an outpouring of gratitude. In time, indeed, awareness of ills is likely to be accompanied by humor rather than chagrin. There is indeed a first turning with a whole heart to God: that is to say, with all the heart that can be gathered together at the time. But with more time we have more heart, and, in repeated turning to God, each time, amazingly and awesomely, is a new turning. Does not the Everpresent make all things new?

This way of prayer can be followed alike by the simple and sophisticated of mind. There is no inward analysis, no looking backward to discover sources of inward ills. There is rather that insight which comes from waiting for Truth to work rather than from taking action as if one oneself were Truth. Prayer of this sort is available for almost every variety and degree of inward sickness and health; indeed, it is out of reach only for persons in the critical phases of severe mental illness of an entrenched character and probably a constitutional basis.

Spiritual or physical help

Clearly there is no area of spiritual suffering in which repeated outcry to God is out of place. But here ages-old problems about prayer interpose. What are the limits of our crying for help? Can we cry for help with physical ills with the abandon we cry out for spiritual help? Should we accept physical ills and cry out for spiritual help alone? The question is not whether a particular type of prayer or meditation is right or wrong. In prayer such distinctions are neither necessary nor useful. The question is one of suitability. Is it meet, for instance, to ask God to take away brain tumors, restore failing livers, and recreate pulverized bones? Are

such petitions in accord with men's and women's deepest experience of God and his truth?

Everpresent is God's healing

The physical is a realm where the power of God is everywhere evident, but it may be that the power is present in this realm irrespective of our asking for it or not. He who makes his rain fall upon the just and unjust also makes his gift of healing available without respect of persons. His presence during critical illness and death seems to be constant not only for those who consciously ask for it but also for those who do not. For that matter, it seems to be as unceasing for those who do not deserve it, at least according to conventional morality, as for those who do. His provision for physical healing is of beyond-words awesomeness. And obviously it is not without spiritual components. Often we get physically sick, even from the common cold, for inward reasons, and inward well-being often speeds recovery from physical ills.

Deliver us from evil, not suffering

How shall we respond to these facts? When we pray for help should we ask for spiritual help alone? Or physical help as well? I strongly suspect that the key to this ancient problem of prayer is connected with surrender of self-will to God's truth. This surrender is what we need most crucially in life; it is needed in a way that purely physical health is not needed. For myself, I am certain that I need to be delivered from evil, not from physical sickness or death, which are not evil. If I have terminal cancer, I am involved in evil only if I make of it a preoccupation that separates me from God and people around me. If I ask physical well-being for myself, I am in danger of declaring that I am special and that God specially should give me what I want. Should I ask him to single me out for physical healing? Prayers for special treatment separate us from our fellow human-beings and then from Truth and soon throw us back into the prison of self-will. Magic, be it remembered, is asking creation to do what self-will wants. Rather than asking God to do away with physical ailments, I should ask strength to accept them.

God hears every true cry

It is truly said that there is no prayer of petition beyond "Thy will be done." So far as we are able to articulate our experience of it, it is God's will that we turn away from the inward spiritual sicknesses that consume us, that we become open to his Truth, and that we call constantly upon him for help in this surrender, never hesitating to hold up to him our spiritual torments. Beyond this, I feel a stop. If inward healing leads to physical healing, so be it. But should not inward healing be the first cry of my heart?

But God hears every true cry. In anguish over the sickness of someone close to us, we often cry out for God's

physical healing with such an intensity that we fail to add, "But thy will, not my will be done." And these can be true prayers, not special prayers. Praying for physical health is somewhat like committing theft: it is less of an evil if it is done for someone else. Perhaps even prayers for our own physical health can sometimes be true prayers: when, for instance, they are uttered in such pain and confusion that the cry is from our whole being and not from our conscious will. True prayer is always an openness to God and a willingness to cry out to him our troubles. With openness, anything can be said to him. There are ways of prayer, but prayer has no rules.

Wrenching the fulcrum

The cry for help can be without words. It can be in any words, even profane ones when uttered from the heart. It is in accompaniment to screams of inward anguish as well as whispers of hope that we wrench the fulcrum point of our lives from ourselves to God. Thereafter, the cry must never cease. It must be repeated again and again: daily, hourly, sometimes minute by minute when necessary. There is no one-shot deliverance; there is deliverance only as a consequence of repeated turnings to God.

11. The second way: acceptance

Not will but willingness

To a marked extent, prayer is not a matter of our initiative but of our inaction, not a matter of taking something up but of letting something go. Grasping something, taking action upon it is a basic effort of the egocentric will, and this effort has been taught to us and illustrated for us as if it were an unchanging element in human nature, ever since the days before we could talk. We know now, of course, that such things as the egocentric will are not a necessary part of human nature or of divine (or diabolical) plan, but, to a considerable extent, an expression of the particular cultural climate into which we were born. We know that human nature is almost infinitely malleable, including our own nature if we are willing to let ourselves be altered. Indeed, we can become whatever we are willing to let ourselves become.

Moreover, it has been known for millenia that true religion has been profoundly aware of the capacity of the individual human being, when charged with the power of prayer, to overcome the deceits and superstitions of convention.

In Western culture, it is customary to reverse the great and simple prayer of acceptance, "Thy will be done," so that it means, "My will be done." Sometimes, indeed, God's will

is confused with man's evil and held responsible for poverty, oppression, manipulation, war, and other social ills so that some people believe their will must be God's will and others that their will must be better than God's will. These are the false answers of convention, as is the definition of will in terms of static cause and effect rather than dynamic emergence.

Will and futurity

For *will* in every language carries the meaning of futurity. Our private objections to God's will are usually based on fear of not having the future under our control. As if we could possibly control it! It may even be an oversimplification to say that God *controls* the future. Among many other things, he *is* the future, and the future is certainly his. Life in his creation and things in it will be as they will be, just as the Everpresent himself will be present as he will be present.

Acceptance prayer is openness to the creation around us, together with trust in the Creator, wherein we are not called upon to judge what happens or to expect what we personally want. Rather we are called upon to accept whatever happens because it is part of God's emerging future: something that happens because it is created and recreated to happen, because it contains within it the unutterable reality of Truth, and not because it is something produced in the heavens by the sort of petty manipulation practiced on earth. The power of God overwhelms conventional imaginings.

Looking not to God but to ourselves

When we are mindful of that power, but look not to God but to ourselves, we may imagine that he constantly directs things to happen or not to happen so as to reward us, punish us, or provide moralistic lessons for us. Such manipulative omnipotence would by no means strain credence: if the power of God is such that he spoke and the universe was, is, and will be, it is also such that he could whisper and billions of details pertaining to billions of persons in billions of worlds could turn out precisely as he chose.

But it strains experienced fact. Since the time of Isaiah in Judah, Buddha in India, and Lao Tzu in China, it has become inwardly evident that God grants favors to the just and unjust, and that he makes himself known as one who suffers with us and not as one who fingers us for suffering.

And it exalts egocentrism. If God runs the world to provide moralistic lessons for me, I am really very much the center of everything. My mind can hardly overflow with felt prayer when I am possessed of the notion that the universe is run on my behalf. I recall with horror the placid claim of a young woman that God had willed her father to die by way of a moral lesson for *her*.

Currently, acceptance is thought first of all to be self-

acceptance, a condition to be reached through self-assertion, self-expression, and self-realization. This sort of thinking amounts to claiming that a man saves his life by saving it, and not, as all higher religions report, by losing it. True self-acceptance — the acceptance that means self-forgetfulness — results from accepting other persons first.

We are indeed called upon to eschew utterly all injustice to others and all the oppression and violence with which injustice is socially manifested, but *as concerns ourselves* we are called upon to accept it. It is impossible to accept the life God gives us unless we accept what takes place in it. When we are hit by injustice, it is not because God takes aim at us; it is because we human beings happen to get in the way of other human beings' selfishness; such injustice is an inherent part of life, and it is acceptable. But injustice to others is not acceptable. We are called to labor against it.

We do not know ourselves

Accepting other people and accepting God's creation are possible only if "Thy will be done" is uttered every time we are inclined to feel hurt, to take umbrage, or to get angry. The prayer must be repeated over and over, not simply in the presence of great and numbing tragedies but also in the midst of small upsets, particularly those that produce sore emotions and make us feel that we should be a law unto ourselves.

It is not easy to admit that we do not know ourselves, yet every view we take of ourselves in a mirror reveals to us how unfamiliar we are even with our own appearance. Other persons easily recognize, even at a distance and with a fleeting glance, that being whose aspect we recognize only with difficulty. When we cease to see ourselves as the center of the universe, we begin to realize that others know us better than we do ourselves. We are not special, but social. We are indeed unique but in this we are ordinary. Everyone is unique.

It is good to be a doormat

Without acceptance, however, we are not ready to consider ourselves just as ordinary as billions of other human beings and, in particular, the ones we know best. If any one of these particular persons rejects us — declines, that is, to look on us as special — we are so jolted that we are likely to become enraged. Someone has blared a horn at us; someone has kept us waiting; someone has told us what to do; someone has frowned at us; someone has questioned our integrity; someone has tried to saddle us with blame; or someone may simply have been present when we made a mistake: we feel an acute loss of face; and accepting the other person, which after all is a first step toward Truth, is heatedly rejected.

"Acceptance? Not that!" we say. "Why be a doormat?" Obviously, to live comfortably released from self-conceit,

but also, although less obviously, to gain the greater comfort of treating other people's feet metaphorically as God's feet. There is never anything wrong with what happens to us. What is wrong is our attitude toward what happens.

Give thanks for what is not wanted

Do not therefore give particular thanks to God for his providing what you want. Give particular thanks for his providing what you do not want: adversity, sickness, fear, depression, the reality of suffering, and the prospect of death. How these things come into creation we do not know, for we know God through his good gifts of wonder and awe and love. But we do know that without inward pain, often severe pain, there can be no growth.

A group of men perplexed about giving thanks for suffering once visited the eighteenth-century Hasidistic teacher, Zusya of Hanipol, who was known as God's fool. Physically weak, for a long time desperately poor, exhausted from much journeying, not infrequently beaten by soldiers and scoundrels, and even nagged by his wife, who was known as a shrew, Zusya also took on himself the suffering of others. When questioned, he laughed. "You certainly have not come to the right man! Better go to someone else rather than me, for I have never experienced suffering."

Suffering accepted is joy, the joy of being present in the midst of creation and loving it and the other persons and creatures to be met in it, the joy of being with them in their pleasures and their sufferings, without the deceit of asserting ourselves against them and against creation itself.

12. The third way: seeking direction

Turning to God and asking what to do

In these days, Zusya's wisdom usually comes to us late in life, if it comes at all, and then only too often near the conclusion of it, when by undergoing sickness and disappointment and by coming to terms with death, we begin to see that Truth, not ourselves, is the center of the universe. At last we come to realize that pain is required for the opening of our eyes. Let us thank God for this insight, but let us laugh at ourselves for delaying it until the last possible moment. If we laugh full-heartedly enough, we may be able to start listening earlier. We may become teachable. And, abandoning the habit common to the self-righteous of treating personal musings as divine guidance, we may turn to God himself.

But this turning means a turning away from the customs of our times, which hold that there is no direction other than self-direction, unless it be that of a super-self like a guru or a

television personality. True direction points toward change and growth, the very idea of which can disconcert those who hold their egos inviolate and either avoid prayer or address narcissistically themselves. For instance, the spiritually smug say that their will is the divine will, insist that they are on cozy terms with Deity, refer to him with vulgar jocularity, and sometimes make him the occasion of adrenalistic excitations. Such sacrilege keeps many from true prayer and turns others away from prayer of any sort.

God teaches more than tells

Before we ask God for direction, therefore, we must turn to him with an entire willingness to abandon such deceit — and to abandon as well the deceit of smug superiority to the smugness of others. The will of God is not facilely discovered, not by us and certainly not by the teachers and prophets who turned to him in agony of spirit and found direction only at the expense of suffering.

Consequently, our prayer must not be, first, the self-directed prayer of "What should I do?" It must rather be the God-directed prayer of the Psalmist, "Teach me thy ways." Of course there is not anything God cannot do. He not only teaches us, he tells us. But he teaches us more than he tells us, I suspect, and certainly he teaches before he tells. Indeed, in our listening to the Everpresent, we must be as alert to the perils of self-centeredness as we are in our speaking to him. We become quick in listening and remain slow in expecting special answers. We are more likely to be taught if we put ourselves in God's hands with all the heart and spirit we possess, than if we ask questions and demand directions.

God's ways are not our ways

Trying to confine the way of divine response in understandable words, however, is a task to be undertaken with extreme reluctance. It is possible to write with some certainty about the ways we approach God, but even to suggest his ways borders on impossibility and impertinence. His plans are not our plans, nor are his ways our ways. Generally, it is better to listen than to question, but, to repeat, there are no regulations in prayer and he to whom we pray is beyond comprehension let alone beyond rules. Great clamors have been raised to him, instant demands made upon him, and all-but-profane cries shouted at him; and to these there is witness that he has clearly responded; there is witness not only in the records of the prophets, teachers, and saints, but even in our own recollections of those occasions when we rose far enough above the poverty of self-love to be open with God.

For that is part of the clamorous prayer of surrender. But it is part also of the quiet prayer for direction. It is usually out of the silent depths of our beings that we make known, first

of all to ourselves, the tremendous fact that God, God the Unknown and the Unknowable, the Undefined and the Undefinable, God the Eternal who is yet the Everpresent, that God does respond to us, that he does speak to us.

It may be useful to delineate three avenues of response.

(1) A response through all of life itself

(1) God speaks to us through every part of our lives, conscious, unconscious, awake and at rest, and in every circumstance whether it be personal or familial or social or even cultural and historical. He speaks to us through friends, strangers, adults, children, and every being and thing, animate and even inanimate, in his creation.

This is a speaking of which we are often unaware when it happens, for its language is the context of each specific happening of our lives. We become aware of it sometimes in periods of silence when the various strands of our life gather together. Sometimes we become aware of it in the very act of praying. Later, we may become aware of it as it happens: happens in the regular course of events, but happens not in some unusual or supernatural course of events. We are simply or supremely aware that the Everpresent teaches us every day through the everyday.

What we are taught, I am inclined to imagine, are not conclusions — and certainly not conclusions about the nature of God and the workings of his creation — but attitudes, attitudes toward life, toward one another, toward Truth. These new attitudes are expressed within us as sudden and at times piercing insights. They are very much the same as those which we learn in the records of man's experience with God that we call scripture.

(2) A response shown in scripture

(2) Scripture, indeed, is the second avenue of God's responding to us. Unceasingly God-conscious in a way that our lives are less often conscious, scripture not only celebrates Divine awareness of the human but also emphasizes the specificness of Divine dialogue and direction. Dialogue and direction, indeed, characterize scriptures in all times and all places. They all seem to result from common experiences of the relationships between man and God and man and man.

It is this communality that makes it possible for men and women throughout the world to pray unitedly. Man's approach to God and God's response to man are beyond theology, beyond canon, and beyond sect, just as the various scriptures themselves are beyond such things. To pray simply and effectively, it is by no means necessary to be intimate with scriptures other than one's own, but it is necessary to know beyond question that God is God of all men, bar none, and that all scripture has to do with the God who is one.

Throughout much of the world today, however, scripture is readily misunderstood and consequently little used. By its very nature, it presents words about a reality that is close to the limit of words and not infrequently beyond it. To convey a sense of divine response, its writers make use of the language of paradox, of heightened images of speech, of constant repetition of phrases, ideas, images, and themes, of innumerable visions of blinding color, of panoramic flights of imagination, and of contrapuntal statements of experience: all of which in many ways resembles tumultuous music more than it does normal speech.

Today it is assumed on many sides that writing of this sort is to be taken literally and discussed in terms of dogma and logic. Scripture is cogitated, not absorbed; it is misunderstood and misquoted; possibly it is misunderstood so that it can be misquoted.

Misunderstanding makes it possible, for instance, to expose oneself to the shattering themes of the vision of Isaiah — the overwhelming reality and force of God, the horrors that befall people who separate themselves from him by idolizing convention, patronizing false priests, and grinding the face of the poor, together with the astonishing goodness that leads him to raise up the cast-down into a kingdom of justice and peace — it is possible for some readers to conclude that God punishes those who do *not* idolize convention, do *not* visit false priests, and do *not* grind the face of the poor. In reaction, still other persons, blame not only the interpreters but Isaiah as well and refuse to read him.

The way to avoid these misunderstandings and to use scriptures both as records of prayer and as source books for them is simply to read them with direct openness to what is written and with a willingness to reflect on them not as statements of ideas or theories or precepts or propositions but as accounts of living and growing experience, directed to people like ourselves and thus to ourselves.

(3) A direct and specific response

(3) The third sort of response is direct and specific and everyday, both in its occurrence and in its content. It is experienced inwardly — and consciously — as something almost physical and is felt as a sense or a stirring or a hearing or a seeing that emanates from Truth itself. Whatever the sensation, it is an interior indication that something is or is not consonant with God's truth or God's will or whatever word shall be understood to mean divine intention.

What nature of response is this? To those aware of it, it is not from unconscious self to conscious self but from no source other than God and to no destination other than man.

Much of what conventionally passes for God's will is little more than triviality, perversity, and deceit. Certainly the so-called will of God has been used to endorse social practices opposite to what the scriptures point to as God's will. But conventional "religious" terminology has little to do with pure religion and with true prayer. Throughout the world, it is the essence of uncontaminated religion that God speaks to man through the whole of man's life and through scripture as well, but that he speaks directly also. Man in turn hears and knows that it is God. For the spiritually awake, the validity of this dialogue is clearly a matter of experience. "This," wrote George Fox, "I knew experimentally."

Simple responses

In contrast to the dramatic dialogues in the scriptures, the responses we hear are typically more homey and often so simple that they are easy to overlook. If I may speak from my own experience, at no time do I now retreat from a clear intimation that God is directing me wordlessly in the concrete circumstances of daily life to turn over the egocentrism that troubled and perplexed a large part of my life, and to turn over as well those addictions and neuroses that used to take away all openness to the creation around me and used to substitute dreams and deceits, depression and aloneness.

I experience a similar clarity that I am directed toward or away from specific emotions, thoughts, words, and actions that could bring me close to the persons around me or else separate me from them. Even at moments of apparent God-forsakenness, I am clear about this communication.

This is indeed simple. And it is all I need. It is enough. But there are also times of spiritual openness, and then I am aware of God's desire that all persons, including miraculously even myself, turn to him in the concrete situations of life and attend his responses. At such times, my heart sings.

How do I know that these inward dialogues are with the God of reality and truth and not with some part of my own unconscious? Of course the dialogues are unconscious: they arise out of the whole being of man, which includes all levels of consciousness and unconsciousness. How then shall they be distinguished from purely subliminal figments of imagination and dream? Clearly, there are various kinds of inward communication, and distinguishing among them is one of the crucial activities of the inward life.

Presence: God's great response

To make this distinction, it is necessary to point to the heart of the divine response to prayer, the central reality of which includes all other responses: namely, the sense of the presence of God. Presence — the first and greatest need of all human beings — supports us, strengthens us, heals

us, gives us new life, and is simply with us in every circumstance of living and dying. In prayer, it leads us to seek what is God's will that we seek, and thus to wish to be prayed through.

And behold how this sense of presence comes about! It does not come about by improving ourselves psychologically or spiritually. It is simply there all the time, no matter what we do and no matter whether we hear, and we have only to accept it. Usually we do not accept it unless the grip of self-will has somehow been loosened. At a time of marked trouble and dispiritedness in my life, I was near death from severe burns for a period of a month, most of which was spent in a delirium of unimaginable horror and duration. Reality disappeared, violence threatened, and time altered itself so that a single night exceeded an eon. Through all this abject terror and torture of mind, I was quite literally taken away from fear of death and made aware of everlasting arms, which were around me in such a manner than I knew they would not loosen. At times of relative clarity of mind, this awareness was one of meaning and beauty, and my reaction to physicians' pleas to fight for life was one of humor.

Presence: with the just and the unjust

This sort of experience is indeed memorable but by no means remarkable, as I learned afterwards from other persons who similarly had become aware of the presence of the Divine. The remarkable part of the experience is that God was present and let his presence be known to one who, so far as spiritual matters were concerned, could not be considered anything but a troubled and miserable sinner. Like his rain, he lets his presence fall upon the just and the unjust. A little bit of prayer goes a long way.

It is in extreme circumstances of suffering and disaster that God's presence is all but inescapable, but he is present, of course, in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, in the usual as well as the exceptional, except that there we are often more likely to overlook him. It is in the ordinary and the usual in particular that we are called to turn to him, and that is the basic task of true prayer.

The free gift of presence calls for the free gift of ourselves

Presence remains for me the great and overwhelming wonder of prayer and of life itself: that God is always there, that he is in true fact the Everpresent, that his being with us can be known wherever we are, in whatever circumstances of spirit and body, and whenever we want. Presence is not a mental image or a belief. It is a fact of a person's whole being. We do not discover this fact. It discovers us. Prayer can be described as, among other things, the process of learning to tell God that we accept what he is already giving us.

And prayer, in this sense, is a finding, a finding of God through his presence, in the course of which we grow sufficiently in intimacy with him to learn to love him and to grow in love to friends around us. Those of us who have been mired in inward sickness become thankful for the anguish in which first we met him, for had we not been sick, how could we have admitted the extremity of our condition and, abandoning our own resources, reached out to the Everpresent for help — and found his presence? It would seem that God wants the free gift of ourselves: wants us to turn to him out of need and want and love and not out of any consideration of punishment or reward. We are not the dogs of God but his children. He wants no dog-like subservience but child-like reaching out.

God wants man

Martin Buber has written that one of the greatest discoveries of the prophets of Israel is that God wants man. William James has written, "God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our own fidelity. For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this."

As God gives presence, so he gives direction. Perhaps his presence and his direction are the same thing. And here the question of prayer's reality becomes pressing, and it must be looked at closely. How can we avoid hearing ourselves when we are seeking to hear God?

It is quite clear, of course, that we hear him mainly within the limitations of our times. Amos, for instance, is nearly three thousand years away from his spiritual descendant Martin Buber. If they were not of one mind, mankind would have nothing to pray to, but if they were not of separate experience, mankind would have nothing to learn but what was long ago learned. God's voice is heard in every man's own hearing and in terms of his own time and place. But this immediacy does not mean that the voice itself is subjective. The fact that God's will and our own willfulness inhabit the same inward region, is no argument that we do not hear God, as the spiritually deaf often believe: explaining the way things happen is no proof of their not happening.

Direction and adrenalism

The question requires a closer look. Somewhat the same physical sensation accompanies the hearing of a divine summons as accompanies listening to loud music, getting caught up in television dramas, taking part in danger sports like car racing and mountain climbing, or even taking a risk in the stock market. Possibly acts of crime and the commission of violence involve comparable sensations. Certainly, self-

righteous anger does. The physical sensation in each case is an inward rise or thrill or stirring, and it is attended by a feeling of appropriateness. In many of the above cases, it is attended also by a sudden flow of adrenalin. Can the reaching out to Truth and the acceptance of direction be no more than part of an adrenalin jag?

Occasionally off, consistently on

Looking on from the outside, it is easy to see that even great religious teachers have at times mistaken something else for direction. On occasion George Fox would get ahead of his leading, even though his message was waiting upon the power of God, and undertake needless or even foolish acts under the impression that God had ordered them: as in his pointless visit to cry "Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield" or in the odd notion that God would doom the judges that persecuted him. Gandhi, who insisted that he did nothing without prayer, sometimes made display of his celibacy and on occasion confused moralism with spirituality.

The important fact here is not that the two men were less than perfect. Like other prophets and teachers, they learned from error and mistake in the same way other people can do. To demand of God's direction that it be followed without error and mistake is simply to impose neurotic standards of perfectionism upon the living and growing creation around us. While Fox and Gandhi could occasionally be off their guidance, they could consistently be on it. These men are indeed known by their fruits. Moreover, from their experience and from that of men and women like them, it is possible to begin to see the differences that unmistakably distinguish the divine will from self-will.

Certain things guidance is not

True guidance can be distinguished, in part at least, by noting what it is not. It tells us not what to tell others to do but what to do ourselves and, more often, what to be. It is not full of scrupulosity, does not order us to obey, at the peril of our souls, hundreds of moralistic rules and petty regulations. It is in no way ritualistic and even tells us not to fall back on phobias and compulsions. And it is not conscientious. Conscience, as we commonly experience it, is simply another device; it is a sense of principle, often valuable, drawn from parental admonition and personal opinion but not necessarily from Truth, which does not direct us to expression of personal convictions but rather to commitment to a way of life centered in the Divine and shared with other people.

When we become alert to human device, we begin to learn that guidance is genuinely different from it precisely in the apparently similar sensations it arouses. Truth stirs

within us far more smoothly and peaceably than do self-excitements, such as skiing down precipices or running through barriers of pain or betting at cards or haranguing a roomful of people or telling oneself one deserves one's own esteem. Indeed, without inward quiet and sensitivity, it is hard to be aware either of guidance or of the Truth from which it proceeds. With quiet and sensitivity, Truth is experienced as sharply different from any other sensation. But alertness to it is destroyed by meretricious emotion, ruined by neurotic tensions, and overwhelmed by sentimentality, suspense, fatigue, and amusements of the sort that play up and down on the nerves.

The sound of Truth is still and small

While Truth is found in quietude, it is typically expressed either in stillness or in ecstasy (which itself can be still), for it shakes us out of the middle area of response into those extremes that are so opposite that they are the same. Scripture reminds us that we are to be hot or cold, not lukewarm.

But the sound of Truth is itself still and small. Attending to it rather than to the racket of conventional noises and notions involves an entirely new way of life. It was from a new way of life that Fox and Gandhi and the prophets of the great religions themselves learned to separate the promptings of self from the truth of God. Into this new way of life we are guided by prayer and meditation, and in the new way of life we find guidance that is unfailing. In this guidance there is joy.

13. The fourth way: a new way of life

Let change happen

If we want to pray so that we are heard and in turn hear, our way of life changes. It changes more than we change it. It also changes unexpectedly. It is not change that requires us to live in the desert eating locusts and wild honey. It is not change for the sake of change — or no change for the sake of no change. Purposeful changing and not-changing are screens behind which to hide from Reality.

The change sought is not intentional change at all. It is change that is the consequence of turning to Truth and not turning away from it. To maintain this spiritual stance, let changes happen that have to happen, and give up what has to be given up. The story of the young man asked by Jesus to give up all the riches he had is not a general argument for living in poverty. It is an argument for giving up whatever separates from God whenever it separates, and is pertinent for the poor in purse as well as the poor in spirit.

What sharply and inescapably separates from God is the

Noises and notions

racket of outside noises and notions with which we surround ourselves to keep from hearing his voice. We may not be called upon to abandon our houses, as the poet Horace somewhat grandiloquently advised his fellow Romans, but we are called upon to surrender ourselves, and in so doing to give up our superstitious worship of success, our propensities to hurt and anger and violence, and our addictions to nerve-jangling amusements. I find, for instance, that half-an-hour of the fear, tension, and suspense of a television drama leaves me incapable of distinguishing between loud noises, let alone small ones. If our sensitivity is made deficient, whether by overengagedness in our amusements, our work, or our churches, so that we can have neither an eye nor an ear for Truth, then it becomes crucial to let our manner of living be altered so that obstacles are removed.

Jangles and alarms

Such removal is the natural consequence of becoming sensitive. To be granted awareness of what is God's presence in our lives and of what is self-will, this is to receive a gift not only of strength but of perception. In the seventeenth century, the Society of Friends — a group of men, women, and children who waited on God in all the concerns of their lives and declined to take charge themselves — found it necessary to give up precisely that racket of jangles and alarms which plays up and down vicariously upon the nervous system, lifting emotions artificially above the solid ground of reality, and making it difficult to distinguish the stirrings of the spirit of Truth. The result was not Puritanism, not renunciation of pleasure nor denunciation of the arts. Things were given up — such things as loud music, intoxication, fatigue, love of money, and unreal excitations — because they hid Truth.

To pray for sensitivity, indeed, is to be willing to let our lives change. When noisy emotion is let go, unreality can be cast away, and things can be seen as they are. Things as they are, even if exhausting and even if tragic, never dull sensitivity.

Liberation from deceit

Sensitivity and simplicity are not more than the first steps of weeding and manuring an inward soil for a new planting and a new growth. The preparations are important not for themselves but for the subsequent harvest. For the harvest is a way of life liberated from egocentric deceits and perplexities, a way in which there are the realities of joy and sorrow, affection and openness for those we know and of love at least for those we meet but do not know. There are also a serenity that can be shaken by evil but not uprooted by it, and a willingness to labor for Truth against oppression and violence as Truth itself directs. What else is this way but loving God and our neighbor, visiting widows and orphans, and keeping unspotted

from the world of convention? God is served by the way we live, not by what we say, for it is the attractiveness of the way we live rather than the persuasiveness of the words we speak that leads others to turn from perplexity toward Truth.

Truth itself makes changes

The new way of living requires not analysis but acceptance. If our lives are not brought into conformity with a quickening dialogue with Truth, we are only imagining faith in God and putting foolish dependence on self-will. A test of whether we pray truly is whether we become willing to place our lives unreservedly in God's hands. Thereupon, we do not make changes so much as Truth makes changes. We find that we are living a new way of life without having planned to, a life clearly different from the old. We find that we have moved from the old to the new easily, undramatically, and almost unnoticeably, discovering in the process an inward fitness that arises from being no longer against God and against our fellows and against ourselves. We come to sense that we may be learning to walk humbly with God and even to work humbly with him.

In this inward fitness, we learn to grow in truth and peaceableness, affection, and joy. We are not delivered from life's labors, physical or psychological, nor from life's problems. Sometimes, under stress of egocentric reaction to them, we lose spiritual ground. Only constant returning to Truth frees us from posturings and frustrations.

Turning to other people

The new way of life becomes possible not only because we have turned to God, but also because we have turned to other persons around us and have let their lives become part of our lives. There is indeed nothing more social than simple and secret prayer. While it can only be uttered personally, it cannot be undertaken alone. Indeed, our relationship to God parallels our relationship to other persons. If we do not surrender to those whom we see and seek counsel from, it is unlikely that we will surrender and seek counsel from God. Left to ourselves, we can only too easily imagine that our will is the will of Truth. Nothing is more dangerous in inward matters than trying to go it alone. How do we learn to pray? Certainly not by ourselves!

It is told of Francis de Sales that, when asked how to learn to love God, he replied that we learn to love by loving. Pressed for explanation, he said that we learn to love as a child learns to walk: a child learns to walk by walking. Only there is a missing element. A child does not learn to walk by himself. A child learns to walk by watching other people walk. We learn to love by seeing other people love. And we learn to pray by participating in the lives of other people who pray.

Learning by being with other people

Usually we do not learn to pray in the private manner by hearing other people pray. Private prayer, the content of it, is typically beyond communication; the dialogue between men and God is more intimate and secret than any other communication. Rather we learn by being with other people when there are silent prayers or when there are open exchanges of our deepest experiences of life: when, in sum, there are evidences of one another's ways of life, which are far more eloquent of our relationship to God than anything our mouths can utter. If God speaks to us through every aspect of our lives, every aspect of our shared lives is our prayerful response to him.

Prayer is not a mark of virtue

Indeed, prayer can never be fully effective until those who pray are in unity and, when possible, in dialogue with everyone they know and everyone they meet, and in particular with the so-called unrighteous who are thought not to pray. Prayer is not a mark of virtue that makes those who practice it better in the sight of Truth than those who do not. Better no prayer than self-righteousness in prayer!

To avoid the pitfalls of a life that inhibits prayer, it is essential to meet often and openly with other people so that it becomes possible, so to speak, to move easily in and out of one another's hearts, as in meditation, prayer, and therapy groups. It is not necessary for such groups to go in for self-expression and self-fulfillment fads. It is unwise to attempt psychological dissection. And it is fatal to embrace leader worship as an imagined substitute for self-worship: derived glory is not less sick than self-glory; the enslavement of self-will to another will remains to be simple enslavement to self. The simple aim is openness to Truth and growth in obedience to it. May light shine! But may we *not* be spiritually refulgent!

The reality of Truth

If our lives are to become freed from former slavery to conventional self-worship, with all its fears and frustrations and exhilarations and exhaustions, deliverance is possible only through a steady attention to God as the center of all reality. There can be no lasting inward comfort unless we are part of a group of people who put themselves in his hands. We are not given to understand his creation. For all our cogitations, even our little world of history perplexes us. It is not our world; it is God's. He is not a thing of our imaginings; he is God. He is not on cosy and sentimental terms with us; he is God. For all our efforts to eclipse him and undermine him and shine instead of him, God is everywhere God. In all religions and in those religions which envisage him as multiple or triune, he is yet God without any other God. The Lord our God is one God.

14. The fifth way: holding all things up

As soon as we are no longer at the mercy of the unconscious, the first four ways of simple prayer begin to merge into one way, a way of constant prayer, a way of holding up to God whatever one is doing, seeing, hearing, or feeling and whomever one is doing these things with. This sort of prayer and meditation is by no means reserved for the spiritually rich and high-minded; it is available to those of us who are spiritually downtrodden and frequently aghast at what is going on in our own emotions. Many areas of our inward being may need change, but only willingness to change, not specific change itself, is prerequisite to up-holding prayer.

All-the-time prayer

For up-holding prayer is the all-the-time prayer of everyday life. It is a lifting up to God of what happens: the mists of morning, the greenness of grass, the snugness of habitations, the brilliance of light, the smell of food and the taste of it, the awareness of other people's starvation, the accounts of disasters in the news, the habits of drivers of cars, the look of passers-by, the manner of fellow workers, the remembrance of friends who are sick and in distress, the warmth of darkness, and so on and on. The praying itself is typically wordless. One simply holds up to God whatever takes place outwardly or inwardly. Our prayer is our attitude.

The course of this prayer is the course of each day, and thus there are frequent occasions of trouble and indecision when the prayer must be a cry for help; there are occasions of anger and hurt when the prayer must be for acceptance. And there are constantly occasions of sudden inward awareness of inadequacies and befuddlements that must be exposed to the will of Truth. Holding up specific fears and depressions and rages and guilts is the best way of getting over them.

Turning everything over

Since all-the-day prayer includes emotions no less than actions, its practice means a turning over to God of remembered reactions to parents, current relationships with family and friends, the absence of persons who are dead, the misery of those who are inwardly sick, the sufferings of the oppressed, and the horrors of violence. As we hold up all these and many other things, help and acceptance and direction come to us without our making an effort to summon them. We even surmount that obstacle which involves overconsciousness of being someone who is praying or meditating, and we learn to pray and meditate without awareness that we are doing so.

Expressive silence

Indeed, the most expressive manner of prayer is the utter stillness that is beyond silence, in which at times there are not

even unspoken words or only such brief phrases — "God help me," "Thy will not my will," "Teach me thy way" — as are necessary to keep the stillness alive. Through stillness of this sort, unity can be felt in the presence of friends without exchange of words or glance.

If we can communicate deeply and eloquently with others by sitting immobile and empty-headed beside them, what cannot we communicate wordlessly with God? Is not stillness the essential means of his converse with us? Can we in any other way discover the good and perfect will of Truth concerning us?

Intercession

But do we intercede for others when we do no more than hold them silently up to God? Or do we intercede more effectively when we pray specifically that the sick in spirit or body be returned to health? I am persuaded that petition is most effective when it is least demanding, and that holding-up prayer — constant holding-up prayer — is true address to the Everpresent, in whose hands, not ours, healing lies. When we pray specifically for the health of friends, God has already been at work with his healing presence. But, of course, his healing (which certainly includes death) is not our healing any more than his ways generally are our ways. When we feel that it is incumbent on us to notify him of what we think he would not otherwise know or would not otherwise be inclined to act on, we go back to superstition and desert trust in him for an idol, an idol that has to be summoned specifically to be informed of what it cannot know or act on by itself.

Petition and self-will

In my experience of it, specific praying for restoration to health can get entangled in self-will. It can even be officious as regards others and delusionary as regards self. It has at times given me a hidden sense of self-important anxiety, a notion that it is up to me to be distraught about sick friends and, by my very emotion, to try to alter the physical course of events. It has occasionally given me a hidden surge of self-importance and even a yearning for grandiosity, arising out of the notion that I am on good terms with God. I am inclined to feel that it is better for the sick and for me to visit them rather than to pray for them in words.

I do not mean to say that God closes his ears when we cry to him in anguish and distress about the well-being of those close to us. His ears, let it be emphasized again and again and again, are open to all cries of the heart, even when they are semi-selfish whimperings, and certainly when they arise from a deep sense of the suffering of others. But I do mean to say that our cry for help is often more for ourselves than for the person prayed for. Him God has already in hand.

Reduced to silence

In times of the severe sickness and death of those close to me, I have found myself first of all uttering prayers that have been little more than confusion. Then I have poured out the confusion in a way that, perhaps, has had some aspects of prayer. And finally I have been reduced to silence, to a crying out of "Oh God, Oh God!" and to a wordless giving over to him of the sick person and of the sickness and of myself. And now I have come to realize that in such travail there emerges a new and stirring sense of God's presence with those who suffer, of his working through us, of his love for all of us, and of his call for our responding love for him and for one another.

I do not now think that my specific praying for the health of friends was wrong, but I suspect that it was not fitting. Am I God that I should know any better than tentatively another person's emotional and physical make-up? Am I God that I should propose inward or outward changes for anyone, when I cannot, in fact, change anyone inwardly other than myself? Verbally, I can advise no one; I can tell only of my experience. Is such a one as I to advise God? Rather let me hold all things silently up to him. Prayer does not begin until I know that I am not God. What greater intercession is there than his presence?

Repeating the Name

One of the schools of Chinese Buddhism holds that nothing more is needed for salvation than the name of God reverently repeated, and that from this repetition even the humblest men and women can receive the light of Truth. This is one form of the true prayer that lifts whatever happens up to God, the prayer of all ages and all peoples who pray in stillness, pray as they work, pray as they rest, pray as they talk, pray as they do nothing, and who occasionally say no more than "Oh God!"

This is, of course, the prayer of my grandmother. It is not lofty prayer but it lifts up, not learned but it teaches, not brilliant but it shines. Simple personal prayer is a type of dialogue quite different from every other communication, and its eloquence lies largely in how little it says. One of the most eloquent prayers I have ever heard was uttered by a woman in the midst of an air raid in West China and consisted of the words, "God, the poor people!"

Prayer of this sort raises us out of our selves and lets us see other persons as they are in reality and not in relation to us. We even see ourselves in relation to them and see that we are constantly in the presence of one another and constantly in the presence of God who is present with all of us. Then all creation is suffused with a new light.

15. Prayer is power

The transforming power and lasting strength of prayer in outward history (including all the lies and oppressions and violence that now assail living persons) is the power that results from admitting the presence of God into our lives. Men and women who have turned to Truth with a whole heart universally speak of prayer and meditation as an incommensurable force released into their lives and the lives of those around them. Known to them as an experienced fact, this power is of such overwhelming character that, if men and women are willing to accept it, the world will be transformed. Change them, and society will be changed. The answer to bombs and dictatorships and violence and oppression is a resurgence propelled by the power of prayer.

When prayer changes men, the world is changed

Not so, not so, say believers in convention. If man is to be changed, social conditions must be changed first; they must be changed according to rational plans and proposed in rational speech, suitably promulgated by the media. According to this view, the power of logic as modified by the power of television is considerably greater than any power of prayer.

The power of prayer is the power of the lived life that springs out of the whole being of men, women, and children. It is not the power of the spoken word or the pictured word or the word dramatized until it plays up and down on the spine. Dramatic words, claimed to change everything, have changed very little and are essentially false words. As atoms collide to perpetuate physical activity, so do our inward wants and sentiments collide, either to perpetuate the social realities around us or to alter them for worse or better.

The power of God is not used to compel us outwardly to Truth. Therefore let us renounce for ourselves the outward power of any man over any other man and, compelling no man, seek to lead others to Truth through love and through the example of being ourselves teachable. For the power of God is manifest in the power of human example, the most contagious thing in the world.

This power may indeed lead us personally to important outward labor with society and its problems, but it is through our way of life that God makes all things new. When other people are irresponsive to the Way and not caught up by Truth, it is evident that we ourselves have not lived and prayed effectively. When they are caught up, it will be evident that we are beginning to learn how to pray. "Let your life shine," we are instructed. Pray simply, quietly, secretly, but live and work openly.

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The Author
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Herrymon Maurer is the author of ten books, including *Great Soul: The Growth of Gandhi, What Can I Know?,* and *The Old Fellow,* a novel about Lao Tzu, as well as the translator of Lao Tzu in *The Way Of the Ways: Tao,* which Schocken Books is publishing in the spring of 1985. Educated at Dartmouth College and the University of Pittsburgh, he is a former editor of *Fortune,* an active Quaker, and a former Trustee of Fellowship in Prayer.

SIMPLE PRAYER describes a way of meditation and prayer that results from giving up self deceits and from looking with awe at the surrounding Creation. In contrast to the credos of reason, such prayer is strictly men's and women's experience of the living center of Reality. From that experience come five specific ways of prayer: a cry for help and healing, willingness to accept what happens, seeking direction, following a new way of life, and holding all things up to God. Such prayer can change men and women and through them change the world. The author writes:

"Presence remains the great and overwhelming wonder of prayer and life itself: that God is always there, that he is in true fact the Everpresent, that his being with us can be known wherever we are, in whatever circumstances of spirit and body, and whenever we want. Presence is not a mental image or a belief. It is a fact of a person's whole being. We do not discover this fact. It discovers us. Prayer can be described as the process of learning to tell God that we accept what he is already giving us.